

DELIUS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER No. 19 - MARCH 1968.

EDITORIAL -

SLOW - SLOW - SLOW, SLOW - SLOW.

One of the most exciting prospects of the new year is the release of new recordings; the first recording of the 'Requiem' and fresh performances of 'Songs of Sunset' and 'An Arabesque'. This being the season for new resolutions, I should like to urge one in particular on performers and interpreters of Delius and I hope they will forgive my presumption, as a virtual non-musician, in doing so.

The resolution I should like them to adopt, is always to keep the music going! In Delius, where the detail is always so beautiful, the temptation to linger by the wayside is particularly strong and yet his music, like any other, demands a vital rhythmic sense. The impetus created by each phrase must carry over into the next so that the music remains 'airborne' and is not allowed to drop to the ground, exhausted. Of course, the context has to be taken into account. For example, in verse three of the first of the 'Songs of Sunset', commencing 'A song of a faded flower', the inner voices have drooping, chromatically descending figures which should obviously be interpreted differently from the similar figure in the first violins at figure 4 in 'The Song of the High Hills' (page 7 of the miniature score), significantly marked 'Very quietly but not dragging'. And yet I remember how this passage was allowed to drag at the performance at the Royal Festival Hall six years ago (indeed the whole piece was taken too slowly).

This tendency has now become so general that one wonders whether there is a widespread belief that the secret in Delius interpretation is to play the music as slowly as possible. There have been a number of radio performances recently which have borne out this contention, one of them being of the Violin Concerto - it is true that in this case, the tempo adopted was similar to that of the old Sammons/Sargent recording, but I have always thought this too slow, as can be seen by comparing it with the Beecham/Pouget version. * It will be remembered that in the recent Secretary's Notes the Liverpool performance of 'Songs of Sunset' is reported on by Mr. Lovgreen, who said that 'the verse beginning "No man knoweth our desolation" was taken very slowly indeed, almost coming to a halt'. One hopes this does not happen in the recording.

Recordings made under the auspices of the Delius Trust are always awaited with pleasurable anticipation and seldom disappoint. The last one, however, although very welcome, exhibited this same defect of slow tempi in 'Songs of Farewell' and in the 'Cello Concerto' the final Allegramente is again taken slowly, so that the whole composition sounds like one continuous slow movement. Sometimes, one feels that the slowness is due to a generous response to the warmth of the music, but in the long run such performances lead to the old accusations of 'formlessness' and 'sentimentality' as if the music were to blame, rather than the performance.

Nothing could be more objectional than a rushed performance of Delius. As the recordings of Sir Thomas Beecham show, however, it is perfectly possible to phrase beautifully without having to resort to a speed at which the 'sense of flow' is completely lost.

* A detailed comparison is to follow in the next Newsletter.

DELIUS AND EXISTENTIAL CRITICISM.

A book called 'The Brandy of the Damned' by Colin Wilson appeared in 1964 and has now been reissued in paperback under the title 'Colin Wilson and Music' (Pan Piper 5/-). The book came to my attention in the latter form and I was very surprised to find that it contained a whole chapter devoted to Delius. Whether one agrees with Mr. Wilson or not, he is always stimulating

and it does no harm to re-examine ones own prejudices to see how well they stand up to his.

First of all, it is necessary to understand Mr. Wilson's critical standpoint. As he explains: 'the alternative to existential criticism is academic criticism - criticism that concerns itself solely with the value of the work, as if it could be determined as precisely as the weight of a pound of butter. For me, no work of art can be clearly separated from the personality of the artist and his life... Nothing useful could be said about Beethoven without taking into account his aggressive attitude to life, his determination to be a conqueror, an emperor of the realm of the spirit... An artist's theories are relatively unimportant compared with his 'basic attitude to life.' (P.20) '... the essence of a work of art is that it is the expression of the artist's personal truth, and the only important question about the work is the value and intensity of the artist's truth.' (P.21).

Now, this is all very well, but how can we judge whether a work of art is 'true' in this sense? Mr. Wilson remains silent and we are left to accept his own judgments, which I presume are meant to be final. In the case of Delius I find little to give me confidence in the author's perspicacity: 'Delius' theories about life were mixed up with a half-digested Nietzscheanism and paganism; but his music reveals the inner Delius - weak, over-sensitive, unsure of himself, afraid of life.' (P.21).

When we reach the chapter devoted to Delius we find this theme elaborated at some length. 'The emotion of Delius' music is thoroughly familiar. It is present in all late Wagner (Wagner's fatalism, his feeling that life is a "dim, vast vale of tears" and that art is a disease that sucks life from the artist.) It is present in Mahler, particularly in 'The Song of the Earth', and in the Schoenberg of the 'Gurrelieder' and 'Verklärte Nacht'. But in Delius the apples of decadence have turned slightly more rotten. We may feel we hear this decadent, dreamy, world-hating Delius in his 'Mass of Life' or 'The Song of the High Hills', but the 'programme' of the music inclines us to doubt our ears... Then we hear the 'Songs of Sunset', settings of Dowson's poems, and it is impossible to doubt any longer. Delius is the musical equivalent of Ernest Dowson. He finds that the 'day is over-long' and believes that exhaustion and death are 'the end of every song man sings'.

If, as Mr. Wilson maintains, 'the essence of a work of art is that it is the expression of the artist's personal truth', then it seems strange that Delius can be lumped together with late Wagner, Mahler and Schoenberg, all of whom had very different 'basic attitudes to life'. On the evidence of their artistic productions alone, it is very difficult to see how they could be regarded as being similar in outlook and if we also consider their lives and writings we see how unlike they really are. To say that 'Delius is the musical equivalent of Ernest Dowson' and then that 'to understand Delius properly it is necessary to understand Dowson' is to make nonsense of Mr. Wilson's chosen method of criticism. If 'no work of art can be clearly separated from the personality of the artist and his life', it would be an absurdity for me to suggest that to understand Elgar properly it is necessary first of all to understand Cardinal Newman.

Having propounded the theory of the indivisibility of art and life, Mr. Wilson proceeds to blow the two apart in the case of Delius. He begins with a sweeping statement: 'All Delius' music is conceived in the mood of Dowson' which is rather like Sir Thomas Beecham's: 'The entire music of Delius takes place in swamps', though even less true. Mr. Wilson continues 'The range of his music is not wide; it varies between the sadness of 'Songs of Sunset' to the sensual, cat-like contentment of 'Summer Night on the River' or 'In a Summer Garden'. It never expresses positive vitality. Even in 'The Song of the High Hills', where there are wordless cries (presumably of satyrs), Delius specifies that they should be "distant cries"; nature must not be allowed to sound too exuberant.' Satyrs in 'The Song of the High Hills'! One can hardly imagine a more comical misunderstanding of this composition, which has nothing at all to do with the world of 'Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune'. The almost savage triumph which characterises the

climaxes of this work is apparently entirely lost on Mr. Wilson, who must bend everything to fit his theory of a 'semper Delius, semper Dowson.'

The personality of the composer is held to be 'the opposite of his music: harsh, intolerant, dictatorial, professing a barren stoicism about man and the universe, and hating religion with a startling violence. It would seem that, like Yeats, Delius created a mask, an anti-self, as a defence against the world'. Having postulated a Delius who was a misanthrope and a life-hater Mr. Wilson continues: 'The oddest thing of all, as Warlock pointed out, is that Delius professed to be a Nietzschean, and set "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" to music. What seems, on the surface, even odder, is that Delius was so much admired by that man of dynamic energy, Sir Thomas Beecham. And yet one only has to read Charles Reid's book about Beecham to realise that Beecham and Delius were alike in one basic respect; both were curiously immature split-personalities. Both were more interested in imposing themselves on the world than in trying to come to terms with life'.

I would not willingly recommend that anyone should read Charles Reid (if I may be forgiven the pun) since I know of no-one with a more atrocious literary style. In addition, he detests Delius' music, as was made quite plain in the articles he wrote at the time of the centenary concerts; the few tongue-in-cheek references to Delius in the Beecham book can be discounted. This, however, is by the way. What astonishes here is that, having said that an artist's life and work are indivisible, and then having divided them in the case of Delius, Mr. Wilson should then try to justify his illogicality by saying that Delius was a split-personality! I can find no evidence for such an assumption. Far from being a misanthrope, Sir Thomas Beecham, in his biography of Delius says: 'The soundest tribute that could be paid to him is that once having gained a friend he, to my personal knowledge, never wholly lost him.' Indeed there were a great many of these friends and Delius was always fond of society, his retirement at Grez being frequently interrupted to return to the Paris life he loved. This is not to say that he was ever anything but extremely selective in the company he kept: the 'average man in the street' repelled him and he would not allow Eric Fenby to speak to the villagers during their evening 'walks'.

I am reminded here of a passage in J.W.N. Sullivan's 'Beethoven': 'He may have known, with the profound instinctive knowledge of genius, that solitude was necessary to the highest development of his creative power' (P.116). Delius' contempt for 'the herd' has its equivalent here also: 'His overbearing manners...were not those of an uncouth provincial, misbehaving himself in all innocence. They were the expression of one of Beethoven's most lasting characteristics, a profound contempt for the great bulk of his fellow-men. To such a man the majority of human beings are more or less random collections of borrowed emotions and borrowed ideas. They are, to an extent he finds it difficult to understand, the result of their accidental circumstances. He finds in them an entire absence of the integrating strength and courage that dwells in himself. Their culture and morality, their aims in life, even their joys and sorrows, seem to him merely characterless reflections of their environment. They have none of his passion for heroic achievement, and in any case they would be incapable of paying the price for it. They are never honest, for the last thing they would face is themselves in their essential loneliness'. (P.66/7).

In conclusion, Mr. Wilson consigns Delius to the ranks of the 'minor' composers (a term which I think should only be applied to composers who invariably write in the minor mode, or who are under the age of twenty-one). He describes them as 'composers with only one thing to say' and continues: 'Delius should be listened to for what he has to give, and there is no point in trying to make merits of his defects. It is tired music, soothing music for exhausted nerves, a dreamy, introverted music that asks very little of the listener except that he should relax. It is also completely unpretentious; it does not ask to be judged as an important utterance. This surely is not the least of its merits.'

This description of Delius' music places it in the same class as the 'mood music' arrangements of such song writers as Cole Porter and Irving Berlin - it is no disrespect to this music to say that Delius' compositions are in an altogether superior category. If Mr. Wilson is unable to obtain more from Delius than a cure for a headache then he is unfortunate. There is no reason why he should suppose that the rest of us can only share his misfortune.

J.K.W.

DELIUS, A GREAT COMPOSER.

Members may remember my article in Newsletter No. 16, which I had hoped would provoke some stimulating correspondence. I was delighted, therefore, to receive a long letter from our member, Mr. Robert Rockliffe, which I shall now quote in full :-

"I feel privileged to have cause to discuss once again what appears to have become "The Delius Problem". But this time my interest is based upon the clarity with which yourself and Deryck Cooke cancel out each others findings from evidence contained in the most recent Newsletter. Mr. Cooke's equation tends towards Delius-x, yours towards Delius+x. Happily, this leaves us the most cherisable of answers: Delius.

But I am concerned with the methods employed in arriving at these interesting conclusions.

Mr. Cooke's observation, which suggests Delius appeals to 'a certain type of music lover only' is not negotiable. It is quite correct, but to this type of music lover his GREATNESS is apparent.

This recognition of greatness is shared by Mr. Cooke and yourself, so when you look forward to the time when Delius will be accepted on the same scale as the recognised greats I interpret this as your wish to see popularity added to his attainments: I'd be quite anxious to spare the composer much of the quite unreliable popular acclaim to which the true greatness of the classical masters has been subject. Therefore, as long as criticism leaves the quality of greatness intact, a lack of range becomes quite irrelevant to the issue of exploring the depths of musical utterance. To the determined critic, cannot this lack to some extent apply to every composer who has lived? One's ability to interest oneself in a wide range of subjects indicates nothing of the profundity of one's involvement. Ought we not to be grateful that Delius dedicated himself to the dimension of depth in the emotive power in music? The great thing is, I believe, that what Delius did he did so unquestionably well that his minority appeal becomes the cold concern of the statistician. Not even Busoni's greatness in intellectual gifts could survive the charge against his eclecticism, even though this showed his output to express wide-ranging musical interests.

You quite rightly cited the remoteness of Mahler and Bruckner thirty years ago compared with their position today, but earlier in your notes, where restraint seems to have eluded you, you thought that the music of our day, which owes its existence to that of Webern, has neither identity nor future. Because you have described a type of universality of this new music I suggest that you refer to his late serial period, for none of his three creative seasons lacks reflection in music-making today.

As to its identity, I feel unable to agree with you. On the question of its future I must hope that you are wrong, for I'd wish future generations access to the immense spiritual gifts I have received from the hands of this new music. It would be depressing to predict the elimination of such prizes as Elizabeth Lutyen's String Quartet No. 6, Richard Rodney Bennett's Aubade and my pet

Symphony: Roberto Gerhard's No. 1, to name a few. Instead, I'd wish to think of them being, like Bruckner, listened to thirty years hence.

Your final paragraph tends to show Delius to be only as great as public acceptance dictates. I recognise that on your part such a tendency could only be unwittingly constructed. It does not help matters to regard Delius as a special case if only in the sense that so many other great artists share his neglect, and with less foreseeable prospect of gaining public ground. Is our public aware of the work of Nikos Skalkottas, which has offered much lucid explanation of twentieth-century methods of composition and therefore promise of a future? Evidently not, but what is his popularity compared with the fact that he has long made the point of his greatness?

I would hope that as Delians we could avoid expecting others to behave towards our composer in a way we cannot be relied upon to act towards music unfamiliar to our encounters. It is perhaps, a sobering fact that on a universal basis serious music finds sympathy which in numerical terms is very unflattering. Delius does indeed belong to a few, but this is less a comment on the composer's stature than on the fact that Delians are a privileged few.

An interesting fact is that Delius-wise I feel quite rewarded by access to musical London, for I have lived for years in a state of total isolation, in the country of my birth, on the question of a real love of his music. History has since endorsed my lonely suspicion of his greatness. But could there be a smaller minority?"

THE PIANO CONCERTO

Mr. Marblacy Jones has been a devotee of Delius' music ever since hearing Beecham's performance of 'Sea Drift' on February 22nd, 1909 and he wrote a very interesting letter to me recently, principally in connection with the 'Piano Concerto':-

"You may be interested to know of my experience with Delius' Piano Concerto when I was conductor of Barclays Bank Music Society's Orchestra, 1927-32. I had been fortunate enough to hear Dr. Theodor Szanto, to whom the work is dedicated, play it at a Prom. Concert under Sir Henry Wood in the twenties. I then purchased a copy of the Piano Score as published by Verlag Harmonie 1907 arranged for 2 Pianos by Otto Singer in its revised form from the original 3 movement work. It was further revised, I believe, about 1918, in particular, with the tempo halved the bar after figure 9 to the end of the first section. It was this version that I heard Dr. Szanto play. I altered my copy to agree with the change. When I came to my first rehearsal I found to my dismay that the score had not been revised to agree with the parts supplied by and hired from Curwens and it had to be returned for correction.

I was much intrigued to note that, about a fortnight or so after our performance in Queen's Hall on the 20th March 1929, the Concerto was included in a B.B.C. Concert conducted by a French Conductor with the Soloist Katherine Goodson.

It was the only work in the programme for which he had a score. A new copy of the score had evidently been supplied, again not corrected, and the result was very unfortunate. Horns & tymps in particular were seriously misled and the Conductor appeared to me to be considerably disturbed. Miss Goodson obviously knew the work well and except for those who knew it there might not have seemed to be much amiss. The critics dismissed the performance calling it an early work influenced by Liszt. I had previously conducted "The Cuckoo" with the same Orchestra (Barolays) on 28th March 1928 at Queen's Hall, and on the 18th December 1930 I

was bold enough to give "Brigg Fair".

Following this I wrote to Delius expressing my great appreciation of his music and was delighted to have his reply:-

Grez Sur Loing (S & M)
14.1.1931.

Dear Mr. Marblacy Jones,

I was delighted to hear of your interest in my music and that your Society is so energetic and enterprising. I wish you all further success.

In the very near future Hawkes & Son will be bringing out quite a number of new works of mine, first of all my new Violin Sonata.

Believe me

Sincerely yours

Frederick Delius.

In conclusion, Mr. Marblacy Jones wonders whether any member could give him information "of the 2 piano version Percy Grainger made of "In a Summer Garden" said to be published in Universal Edition but not obtainable today."

MISCELLANY

Mr. Parfitt reminds me that in Derek Hudson's "Norman O'Neill" - a biography of that composer by his son-in-law, - 'Delius is mentioned on quite a number of occasions; there is also a chapter on the relationship between the two men and quotations from some of Delius' letters. Delius was very fond of O'Neill and the book confirms this relationship.' Mr. Parfitt continues 'I have little doubt that it is out of print now. It was originally published by "Quality Press Ltd." in 1945'.

Still on the subject of books and writers, Mr. Cook wrote to point out 'a reference to Delius in a letter about T.S. Eliot's friends in the Observer on the 18th June. The letter (was) from the formidable Prof. J. Isaacs and the statement which probably (came) from Eliot himself is that Delius went to the Schiffs' parties in the early 20's. The Schiffs = Stephen Hudson, who wrote "A True Story" and translated "Le Temps Retrouve" after Scott Moncrieff's death' Mr. Cook feels this might be wrong; 'I think Mrs. Schiff, who was very avant garde, might have scalped Van Dieren, but D ?'

A letter from Miss Rachael MacDonald informed me that as she was spending much of her summer holiday at her home near Bradford, she visited 'the new library, only recently opened and very modern. I was over-joyed to find, in the music library, a 'mini-exhibition' of Deliana, albeit a mere collection of scores, books and record covers, along with a list of important dates in Delius' life. The library also has all works by, and books on, Delius, catalogued separately under the title "Delius Collection" for quick reference'.

Newsletter 16 contains an error on page 7; the 'fine book on Hugo Wolf' I mentioned was by Frank Walker, not Ernest Newman (who also wrote a book on Hugo Wolf). I should like to see a work of equivalent scholarship on Delius' life. The books so far written have penetrated very little below the surface.

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